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ABSTRACT

A study explored the development of emergent literacy among inner-city kindergarten children participating in a "read-at-home" program. The program focused on the enjoyment of reading, required minimal involvement from the classroom teacher, and encouraged parents to become involved in any way they wanted. Twenty-eight children, enrolled in two classes, each received a storybook to take home (and to keep) approximately every 2 weeks for 14 weeks. Emergent literacy was assessed from several perspectives: parental observation, classroom teacher observation, classroom behavior observed during book distribution, and emergent reading ability using E. Sulzby's Emergent Reading Ability Judgments Scale (ERAJ) and B. Otto's categories of assisted reading. Text complexity was varied between classes: one class received traditional storybooks/tradebooks, and the other received commercially developed books for beginning readers. The Read-at-Home program received positive evaluations from parents (88% reported their children used the books every day or several times a week) and the classroom teacher (who reported children's increasing interest, with children asking repeatedly when they would get their new books). Analysis of pre- and post-ERAJ scores indicated that 75% of the children read at a higher level at the end of the project. No children focused on the print during the preassessment; 10 of the 28 children were attempting to track print at postassessment. Text complexity appeared to influence the emergent reading ability levels of some children. (Two tables of data are included, and 22 references are attached. An appendix lists the books used in the program.) (Author/SR)

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Development of Inner-city Kindergarteners' Emergent Literacy in a Read-at-Home Program

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the development of emergent literacy among inner-city kindergarten children participating in a "read at home" program. Twenty-eight children enrolled in two classes each received a storybook to take home approximately every two weeks for a period of fourteen weeks.

Emergent literacy was examined from several perspectives: parental observation, classroom teacher observation, classroom behavior observed during book distribution, and emergent reading ability using the Emergent Reading Ability Judgments Scale (ERAJ), (Sulzby, 1981, 1985) and categories of assisted reading (Otto, 1984). Text complexity was varied between classes: One class received traditional storybooks/trade books, the other received books commercially developed for beginning readers.

The Read-at-Home program received positive evaluations from parents and the classroom teacher. Analysis of the pre- and post-ERAJ scores indicated that seventy-five percent of the children read at a higher level at the end of the project. No children focused on the print during the preassessment; ten of the twenty-eight children were attempting to track print at postassessment. Text complexity appeared to influence the emergent reading ability levels of some children.

Development of Inner-city Kindergarteners' Emergent Literacy in a "Read at Home" Program

Acquiring literacy skills is a critical accomplishment for all children and especially for inner-city children, who may come to school with limited knowledge of written language (Purcell-Gates, 1989). In a study of high school dropouts, reading ability at the primary level was the highest predictor (poverty was second) of becoming a high school dropout (Griffin, 1987). While some intervention programs focus on the home, most intervention programs for elementary-aged children are school-based, and are carried out completely during school time. The project reported here focuses on a storybook reading program introduced at school and then extended to children's homes.

The impact of the home environment on the growth and development of young children has been well-documented. Intervention studies that attempt to increase the quality of the home environment or parent-child interaction often involve procedures or provisions to train and/or monitor parent-child interaction (Karner & Zebrbach, 1977; Berger, 1981). While such projects (Berger, 1981; Griffiths & Edmonds, 1990) may report measureable and even significant results, implementation on a larger scale is not

practicable. At-home visits, frequent parent workshops, one-on-one conferencing may work for a short-time, but the time- and energy-consuming nature of such activities makes it difficult to accomplish with large populations of children and parents regardless of income or educational level. Yet the need for improved literacy requires that large populations of young children and their parents be reached èfficently and effectively. One approach that was tried and proven effective was reported by Mason & McCormick (1986). In their work, Mason & McCormick developed "little books", books with very simple text, and placed them in preschool children's homes. Results indicated a significant increase in children's interest in reading and literacy-related knowledge.

Could it be that a main factor influencing the literacy environment of low SES homes is that books for young children are just not present? Would simply providing the children and their families with books encourage young children's interest in becoming readers?

Wells (1981, 1982) attributes storybook experiences as being "probably the best way" of encouraging the development of literacy skills. In a review of research on storybook experiences, Morrow (1989) summarizes the values of parents reading to their children: children's interest in reading

increases, children become familiar with written language and its function, vocabulary development increases, and children learn a sense of story structure.

Storybook experiences have been a long-established early literacy experience in middle-class homes (Taylor, 1980; Doake, 1981) and in homes where children acquired reading ability prior to formal schooling (Durkin, 1966; Price, 1976; Clark 1976). Children who are read to regularly at home begin to do independent reenactments ("readings") of storybooks (Sulzby & Teale, 1987). Otto (1984) found children's responses during assisted and independent storybook interactions did not occur randomly but were based in their developing knowledge about written language and reading. Differences have been noted among families from different economic backgrounds. Heath (1982) and Teale (1986) have documented the lack of storybook reading among low income families. McCormick and Mason (1986) found low SES parents provided less support for reading at home than did middle SES parents, especially with regard to the number of alphabet books owned by children.

In addition to exploring further the impact of placing books in children's homes, we wanted to explore the use of two different text types: traditional storybooks and commercially prepared "beginning reader" texts. The language used in trade books is richer in

description and more varied in structure than is the language of pre-primer type materials. Trade books provide high interest text that communicates a fully developed story and rich illustrations. Such a text may be more interesting to both child and parent, increasing the likelihood for storybook interactions at home. Being exposed to more complex texts may also influence children's acquisition of written language structures. To determine the effect of text-type, one class was given "traditional" storybooks while the other class was given books developed commercially for beginning readers.

Specifically, this project focused on the following questions:

1. What are kindergarten children's responses to a Read-At-Home Program?

2. What are parents' responses to a Read-At-Home Program?

3. What is the classroom teacher's response to a Read-At-Home Program?

4. Will children's emergent reading ability increase during a Read-At-Home Program?

5. Will parents and the classroom teacher observe any changes in children's literacy-related behaviors?

6. Will differences in text types be accompanied by differences in emergent reading ability?

A major factor researched was the impact of

providing storybooks children can take home and own--storybooks they can read whenever the opportunity arises. By providing children with storybooks to take home and keep, all children had access to books, regardless of income constraints or situations that may complicate use of public library books by inner-city families. This provision makes the child's home environment more similar to middle-class literacy-rich homes where book ownership is common.

Methodology

Sample. This study was conducted between October 1989 and February 1990 at an inner-city public school. Two classes of kindergarten children participated in the study. Both classes had the same teacher. A total of 47 children were enrolled in the two classes as of October. By February, seven children had moved out of the school's area and seven children were moved to different kindergarten rooms in the same school. One child did not sign up for the program. Four children were dropped from the analysis due to absences during the pre- and/or post assessment periods. This left 28 children (12 boys; 16 girls) in the study. The morning class had eighteen children; the afternoon had ten children. Children represented a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Six children had limited English-speaking abilities. Both classes had the same traditional reading readiness curriculum.

Enrollment in both classes was determined by the

school, based on prekindergarten standardized test scores. Both classes were designated as above-average.

Program Design

The Read-At-Home Program was designed to focus on the enjoyment of reading, require minimal involvement from the classroom teacher, and to encourage parents to become involved "any way they wanted to."

Prior to beginning the project, a parent meeting was held to acquaint parents with the Read-At-Home Program, and to obtain permission for their children to participate. Children whose parents did not attend the meeting took program information and the permission forms home to their parents. All but one child was enrolled in the Read-At-Home program. While parents were encouraged to read with their child, no "requirements" were established.

A second parent meeting was held at the end of the project at which time parents completed a post-questionnaire that asked them to evaluate the program and to describe their children's literacy-related behaviors at home. Children whose parents did not attend the meeting took the questionnaire home to their parents. All questionnaires were completed and returned.

Book selection. Seven books were selected for each class. One class received traditional-type storybooks; the other class received books commercially

developed for beginning readers (See Appendix). Criteria for choosing traditional storybooks included known popularity of the book with this age group, topics familiar to urban children, and a clear sequence of events or narrative.

Commercially developed books for beginning readers were selected using similar criteria, i.e. Was the book known to be a favorite? Was the topic familiar to urban children? Was there a clear sequence of events in the story? For the most part, the two groups of books had similar topics, e.g. Peter's Chair and Little Brother both dealt with a young boy's learning to accept a new baby in the family.

Book distribution. One selected book was distributed to each child approximately every two weeks. Each child received a total of seven books. Children were told to take the book home and read it with a parent, another adult, or an older sibling. Children were also encouraged to "read" it by themselves.

Classroom teacher's role. During the week prior to giving the books to the children, the teacher read the book at established group storytimes. She also engaged the children in discussing each book, asking comprehension questions about story events, characters, vocabulary. Children were not encouraged to recite story lines or to attempt to "read" the text. The focus remained on enjoying and comprehending the story.

Analysis

Parent questionnaires. Parent questionnaires were tallied and examined for feedback on the Read-At-Home program. Thirty-three parents returned questionnaires. In addition to the 28 children in the study, this includes four children dropped from the pre-post analysis due to frequent absences and a child who enrolled in school in December.

Classroom teacher interviews. The teacher was interviewed each time the books were distributed. She was asked what responses the children had to receiving books and what book-related behaviors she noticed in the classroom.

Emergent reading ability assessment. Assessment of emergent reading ability was conducted at the beginning and at the end of the study, using Sulzby's (1985) Emergent Reading Ability Judgments Scale (ERAJ). In this assessment, children are asked to "read" a storybook "anyway they want to". If the child initially refuses to read, subsequent prompts ask the child to "do your best, give it a try", "pretend". Final prompting involves asking the child what help s/he needs in order to read. For continued refusals, the examiner initiates a shared reading with opportunities for the child to participate (Otto, 1984).

The ERAJ scale (Sulzby, 1985) has five main

categories: holistic reading; print-governed, aspectual reading; picture governed reading that is written-language-like; picture-governed reading that is oral language-like, and reading in which story fragments are described with labels or action sequences. Assisted reading categories (Otto, 1984) include non-verbal responses, echo responses, semantic responses, and verbatim-like responses.

In the pre-assessment children were asked individually to read a traditional storybook (Mr. Gumpy's Motor Car) and a beginning reader (Mrs. Wishy Washy) to the examiner. Both books had been read to each class by their teacher for one week. In addition to audiotaping the children's reading, brief notes were taken during the taping sessions by the examiner. Procedures for the post-assessment were the same as the preassesssment except for adding a third book. Harry the Dirty Dog was the traditional storybook used for post-assessment and Stop! was the beginning reader used. In addition, children were also asked to read Mrs. Wishy Washy, which was used during the pre-assessment and was very popular with the children. Neither the children or their teacher were aware of the specific books to be used in the post-assessment. Copies of the books used in the post-assessment were removed from the classroom when the post-assessments began.

Emergent reading ability judgments were made after

a review of each transcript, audiotape, and session notes. Judgments of emergent reading ability were made by the author and a trained scorer. Scoring differences were reconciled and categories further clarified.

Results

Parent Questionnaires. When asked what changes they had observed in their children during the course of the Read-At-Home program, parents reported increased interest in several literacy-related activities. (See Table 1) An increase in children's interest in trying to read and in printing or trying to print was reported by nearly three-fourths of the parents (73%). The area of least increase was in drawing (58%).

Parents also reported frequent use of the selected books in their homes. Eighty-eight percent (29/33) of the parents reported their children used the Read-At-Home books every day or several times a week.

Classroom teacher's evaluation. When the second storybook was distributed, the teacher reported an increase in children's interest in the classroom storycorner. By the third storybook's distribution, two weeks later, the teacher said children kept asking on a daily basis when they would get their new books. At the end of the project, the teacher reported that children took better care of the classroom storybooks than previous classes had. She also felt personal

ownership of the books was an important aspect to the children. Because each book had a child's name permanently written on it, children were assured that it was their book and no one else's. Further, children were then aware that they did not ever have to return the book. When asked if the children responded differently to the two text types, the teacher said that the simpler, beginning reader appeared to give children more confidence and encouraged them to attempt to track print, while the traditional storybook had a richer, more complete story.

Classroom observations. When the children were given their books, a range of literacy-related behaviors were seen throughout the study. Some children laid the book on the floor, reclined, and talked with a friend about the book. Occasionally several children would take their new books over to the cushions in the reading corner and carry on conversations while going through the book. Some busily opened the book and began to orally recreate the story for themselves or with a classmate. Some appeared to focus on the print when verbalizing story segments, others would focus on the illustrations or page silently through the book. Frequently children would approach the researcher and exclaim, "I can read this book!" Still others would play with friends, using the book to give a classmate a friendly swat or to fan themselves.

Pre-post Comparisons of Emergent Reading Ability. As a group, kindergarteners showed marked differences between pre and post measures of emergent reading ability. (See Table 2) Two specific categories of response were examined for children's reading of Mrs. Wishy Washy at the beginning and end of the study.

First, the number of children giving refusals which resulted in assisted readings was examined. Assisted readings occurred when a child refused to independently read the book. The examiner then read the text, a portion at a time, pausing to create a linguistic gap and thus encouraged the child to participate verbally.

In October, seven out of 28 (25%) readings were assisted compared to only 1 out of 28 readings in January (end of the study).

The next comparison involved the number of children reading in the aspectual category. In this category, children show attention to print while reading and attempt to track print. In October no readings were at the aspectual level; in January 9 of the 28 (32%) readings of Mrs. Wishy Washy were aspectual.

Similar results were also found with the more complex text. There were fewer assisted readings and more aspectual readings in January than there were at the beginning of the study in October.

Intra-child comparisons. Individual children's pre- and post-readings of Mrs. Wishy Washy were examined for evidence of growth toward using more written-like language or conventional reading behaviors. Of the 28 children in the study, 21 children's readings in January were at a higher level of emergent reading ability than they were in October. Six children's pre- and post- readings were at the same level. One child's post-reading was at a lower level than her pre-study reading.

The next analysis examined the readings of only those children who were reading Mrs. Wishy Washy aspectually (focusing on print) in January. This was a way of looking at the changes that occurred in their pre-post readings. While the ERAJ scale has developmental properties, children do not appear to follow a common sequence from one level to the next (Sulzby, 1985). Similar findings occurred in this study. Although this sub-group of children were reading aspectually in January, their October (pre-study) readings were represented by a range of emergent reading behaviors: assisted reading with semantic responses, story fragments/action-governed, oral-written language mix, written language-like (not verbatim) and verbatim-like attempts.

Children who read the more complex text (Harry the Dirty Dog) aspectually in January also had a range of pre-study reading categories: assisted-echo, semantic,

verbatim; oral-written mix, and verbatim-like attempts.

Two conclusions are suggested by this data. It may be that some children increased more in emergent reading ability than others, or it may be that some levels or categories were entirely skipped by certain children. There is insufficient data to strongly support either conclusion. Clearly, there is a need to study more closely how children make the transition to attempting to track print. More frequent measures of a group of children's interactions with storybooks over an extended time are needed.

Role of Text Complexity. Storybooks with different text characteristics were used in this study to see if children's emergent reading abilities would be related to text complexity.

Text complexity was examined in two ways: between class comparisons and within children comparisons. Although children were asked to read both types of text in the pre- and post-assessments, each class received only one type of storybook text to take home and keep. The morning class received traditional storybooks, while the afternoon class received beginning reader books.

Examination of post-emergent reading behaviors indicated that the class that took home the beginning reader books had fewer readings categorized as print-governed/aspectual than did the class receiving the

traditional storybooks (See Table 2). When the two classes' pre- and post-readings of complex text (Mr. Gumpy's Motor Car and Harry the Dirty Dog) only the traditional storybook class (a.m.) had children who read aspectually in January at the end of the study. There were also differences in the level at which simple text was read by the two classes. In October, none of the children in either class read the simple text (Mrs. Wishy Washy) aspectually, however, in January eight children from the traditional storybook group read simple text (Stop!) aspectually, while only two children from the beginning reader group read at that level. These differences disappeared, however, when children read a more familiar book (Mrs. Wishy Washy) that had been used for preassessment and had become a favorite of both classes during the 14-week period.

The differences between classes suggests that children whose reading experiences involve only simple text found in beginning readers are less able to interact with more complex text found in traditional storybooks. It may also be that by having the traditional storybooks at home and using them in a variety of ways, the a.m. children were more confident of how to interact with storybooks.

Intra-child Influence of Text Complexity. For some individual children, text complexity did appear to influence emergent reading ability, as their reading of

the more complex text was at lower levels of emergent reading ability than their reading of beginning reader texts. In the pre-test, 46% of the children read Mr. Gumpy's Motor Car at a lower level of emergent reading than they read Mrs. Wishy Washy.

For example, Jackie's reading of Mrs. Wishy Washy was written language-like (not verbatim):

"Mrs Wishy Washy. Lovely mud, said the pig, so he jumped in it.....There goes Mrs Wishy Washy going back in the house"

When Jackie read the more complex text of Mr. Gumpy's Motor Car, her reading was at a lower level, disconnected oral story:

"...The sheep got in, in the truck. They all fitted in the truck, right? Someone needs to push, right? Who, who's gonna go and push? Who is? This one, or this one, or there's one, there's one. See? Finally, let's take the track. They wanted to take the track. All fit in. The rain comes. It's starting to get rainy. They push this little up there and put the hood on it...."

Such contrasts in emergent reading ability with different levels of text complexity indicates that when assessing children's emergent reading ability, the characteristics of the storybook's text should be considered since some children's emergent reading ability level can be influenced by text complexity.

Conclusions and Implications

The Read-At-Home Program proved to be successful in increasing children's motivation to become involved with books. Parents as well as the classroom teacher reported increased interest by the children in reading and reading-related activities. Many parents reported their children used the storybooks daily or several times a week. Parents were eager for their children to receive the take-home storybooks. The level of participation was high. Only one out of 47 children enrolled in the fall did not initially participate in the study. All parents whose children remained enrolled in the two classes returned the post-project questionnaire.

The classroom teacher was very supportive of the Read-At-Home Program. The program fit into her established curriculum easily and provided additional books for the classroom library. She was excited about the changes she saw occurring in the children.

As a group, children's emergent reading ability increased from October to January. There were fewer assisted readings in January. While no children focused on print when reading in October, 32% of the children focused on print in January. Of the 28 children in the study, 21 (75%) children's post-readings were at a higher level of emergent reading ability. This amount of increase is similar to that (16/24, 67%) reported by Sulzby (1985) in her study of

kindergarteners; however, in Sulzby's study the length of the time between measures was longer, from the beginning to the end of the school term (October to May). When compared with Sulzby's study, children in this study appeared to increase in emergent reading ability at a faster rate; however, since end-of-the-year data was not collected in this study. It is clear that the children in the Read-at-Home program did increase in emergent reading ability during the 14-week time period.

Emergent reading ability appeared related to text complexity for some children. For those children, books with more complex text were read at a lower level of emergent reading ability. The class that took home the simple text storybooks showed slightly lower levels of emergent reading ability when reading more complex text (traditional storybooks) than the class receiving the traditional storybooks to take home.

To more carefully observe growth, several areas of further study are needed. Longitudinal study of the impact of providing storybooks to children from inner-city homes is needed using a control group to provide comparative growth data as well as data for cost-benefit analysis. Repeated, frequent measures of emergent reading ability controlling for text complexity and book exposure are needed to further describe how young children become readers and to

clarify the developmental properties of the ERAJ scale and the role of assisted reading. Expanding the read-at-home approach to higher grade levels (first to third) would more clearly determine the effect of take and keep books on elementary children's motivation and interest in reading as well as their language-related abilities (comprehension and written composition skills).

Enlisting help from parent and community groups, as well as business-school partnerships can facilitate putting books into the hands of emergent readers. Many communities conduct "Toys for Tots" campaigns each year which could easily become "Books for Kids" campaigns. Schools could also rethink the purchase of workbooks for early grades and instead provide children with books to take and keep. While read-at-home programs that provide free books to children and their families may initially appear to be too expensive, the social and economic impact of illiteracy (or even low-level literacy) is also very expensive.

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APPENDIX

Storybooks Used in Read-At-Home Program

A.M. Classroom-Traditional Storybooks

Burningham, J. (1973). Mr. Gumpy's Motor Car. London: the Penquin Group, Penquin Books Ltd., Middlesex, England.

Eastman, P.D. (1960). Are You My Mother?. NY: Random House.

Freeman, D. (1968). Corduroy. NY: Puffin Books.

Keats, Ezra Jack (1967). Peter's Chair. NY: Harper & Row.

Nodset, Joan L. (1963). Who Took the Farmer's Hat? NY: Harper & Row.

Slobodkina, Esphyr (1940). Caps for Sale. NY: Harper & Row.

Zion, Gene (1956). Harry the Dirty Dog. NY: Harper & Row.

P.M. Class-Beginning Reader Books

Crowley, Joy (1980). Mrs Wishy Washy. Auckland, New Zealand: Shortland Publications.

Crowley, Joy (1982). Stop! Auckland, New Zealand: Shortland Publications.

Crowley, Joy (1983).Feet. Auckland, New Zealand: Shortland Publications.

Crowley, Joy (1986). A Hug is Warm. San Diego, CA: The Wright Group.

Crowley, Joy (1986). Little Brother. San Diego, CA: The Wright Group.

Cutting, Jillian (1988). Getting Dressed. San Diego, CA: The Wright Group.

Cutting, Jillian (1988). Shopping. San Diego, CA: The Wright Group.

Table 1: Changes in At-Home Literacy-Related Behaviors Reported by Parents

Behavior	Number	%
More interest in having stories read to him/her	23/33	67%
More interest in telling stories to other people	22/33	67%
More interest in drawing	19/33	58%
More interest in printing or trying to print	24/33	73%
More interest in trying to read	24/33	73%
More interest in environmental print	20/33	60%

Table 2: Summary of Pre- and Post Emergent Reading Ability Judgments for Kindergarteners' Storybook Readings

Book/Class	Category of Emergent Reading Ability					
	Refusal	Assisted Reading	Story Not Formed	Oral Language	Written Language	Aspectual
October						
Mrs. Wishy Washy						
A.M.*	--	7 (39%)	--	--	11 (61%)	--
P.M.	--	--	1 (10%)	1 (10%)	8 (80%)	--
Mr. Gumpy's Motor Car						
A.M.	1 (5%)	8 (44%)	--	--	9 (50%)	--
P.M.	--	4 (40%)	--	3 (30%)	3 (30%)	--
January						
Stop!						
A.M.	--	3 (17%)	2 (11%)	2 (11%)	3 (17%)	8 (44%)
P.M.	--	1 (10%)	1 (10%)	2 (20%)	3 (30%)	2 (20%)
Mrs. Wishy Washy						
A.M.	--	1 (5%)	--	--	9 (50%)	4 (44%)
P.M.	--	--	--	1 (10%)	5 (50%)	4 (40%)
Harry the Dirty Dog						
A.M.	--	5 (28%)	--	2 (11%)	6 (33%)	5 (28%)
P.M.	--	1 (10%)	1 (10%)	4 (40%)	4 (40%)	--

(*A.M. n=18; P.M. n=10; Same children in both October and January collections).